

Pam. India

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Casting Out Devils in India

BY REV. W. T. SCUDDER



A WOMAN RECEIVING THE CEREMONIAL BATH

THE BOARD OF FOREIGN MISSIONS, REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA
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DIPPING WATER FROM THE POOL, AND DECORATING THE DEVOTEES WITH GARLANDS



ALAIYANUR, a village within the bounds of our Mission is one of the chief centres in which the goddess Angalamman, the special deity of the

Fisherman Caste is worshipped. In her behalf, a very important festival is held in February or March, attended by thousands of people. The goddess we are told, was a girl belonging to this caste with whom the god Siva once fell in love. The most propitious time for "casting out devils" falls at the time of this festival.

From our observations, we noted that only women, and chiefly young women, at that, were brought under the satanic influence. They are "possessed" in the inexplicable manner so common in India. The disease is perhaps some obscure form of hysteria or epilepsy. People are believed to obtain relief from the affliction by going, during the feast, to the place where dead bodies are burned and-seizing and pretending to gnaw the human bones found lying there. What the idea underlying this unsavory proceeding may be, it is hard to say; but all powers of darkness and black magic are popularly connected with the burning-grounds.

The temple is guarded by a Viran. Several different stories are told to account for his origin, but they agree in declaring



THE GUARDIAN VIRAN

that he was a great devotee of the goddess and gave his life to please her. The usual version says that he was out hunting one day and accidentally shot an arrow into an ant hill in which she happened to be living. He took a pick-axe and began digging out the arrow, and in so doing he unwittingly wounded the goddess of whose presence he was unaware. Overcome with remorse, he asked what he could do to atone for his sin. The deity replied that he could get her some food, as she was hungry. Instantly he disembowelled himself with the pick-axe and offered her his vitals. Angalamman was so well pleased

with his devotion that she ordered him always to remain near her, and his image consequently invariably appears outside her shrine. Within the temple a model of the ant hill is worshiped. His influence with her is supposed to be still so considerable, that he takes an important part in the casting out of the devils who are exorcised by her powers.

An unusual item in the events of the festival is the "looting of the burning-ground". The people who go, cook large quantities of grain, and this is all set out on the burning-ground and offered to the goddess who is brought there. Then a signal is given, and all those present scramble wildly for the food and each

carries off as much of it as he or she can seize.

It was to this festival that Rev. Henry Honegger and I went with a preaching band in February. Selecting a large tree with full foliage, so as to protect ourselves from the fierce rays of the sun, we pitched the tent beneath it, together with one for the workers, and prepared to remain a number of days. The town in which the temple is located is 25 miles away from the nearest railway station, so all who attend must come on foot or in the two wheeled common carts. It was calculated that there were some 20,000 such carts present on the great day. One train of 250, we were told, came 65 miles. We had a great many opportunities to preach the Word and sell portions of Scripture. On the last day the excitement was so great that but little preaching was done. Small groups were engaged in conversation and sales pushed. Little or no opposition was met with anywhere.

Our hearts were indeed saddened by what we saw and heard. Without visiting such a festival as this, one can but little realize the hold the superstitions of Hinduism in its primitive form has on the people. Every missionary to India, early in his career, should visit this or some other large festival so as to get an idea of its power.

The festival covers a period of 10 days. Large numbers of petty traders open stalls



GATHERING ASHES AT THE BURNING GROUND

and barter their goods. One of the largest cattle markets in the district is conducted at this time. Instead of being a sacred festival it appears more like a public holiday or picnic on a grand scale. There is no religious teaching, no public instruction where people are presented with spiritual truths. Vast numbers visit the shrine and make an offering to the goddess but that is all.

The immorality practiced a few years ago was open but has been somewhat done away with by the orders of the Government authorities, for which we are very thankful.

What interested us most, was the "casting out of the devils." This is done by a class of priests who gather here from all quarters. Some 6 or 8 seem to constitute a company who have certain brass instruments and little drums with which they maintain a weird music with perfect rhythm. A young woman is brought before the group by the relatives who state that she became possessed at a certain time in the year and that they want to drive out the devil. Sums of money are paid for the service rendered. All her jewelry is removed, her clothes securely fastened with a band, otherwise when under the influence of the spirit she might wholly divest herself of her covering, which consists of a single cloth. She is made to sit down and the music then begins, at first with slow and even tread, accompanied by singing. Soon



AN OLD MAN RECEIVING HIS ABLUTIONS

her head begins to keep time with the music, then the body to sway back and forth. Later, questions are put to her, and if her answers are satisfactory an order is given and large quantities of water is poured over her. The purpose of this I do not know. Again the music begins, the woman again keeps time with the head and body which are thrown back and forth, back and forth, faster and faster as the music is accelerated. You are almost impelled to seize and prevent her from breaking her neck. Again questions are asked

and music continued; this may go on for hours, after which a knot is tied in the hair, the ashes of the dead thrown in her face and the devil declared "cast out." It now remains for the people to go to the temple on the last day, make their offerings to the goddess, and have the woman's head shaved, the hair with the vermin there, are left for the temple.

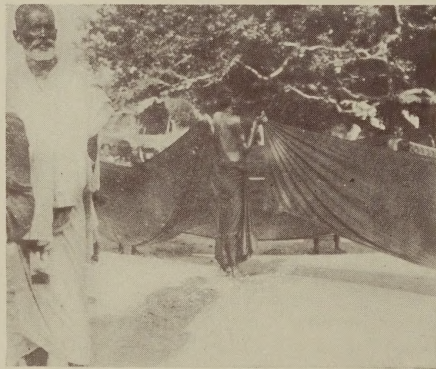
I watched one of these performances; there were literally hundreds of them taking place. The woman first presented stated after being brought under the influence of the spirit that there were six others in her party who were possessed. Upon orders of the chief priest, she proceeded to bring them up one by one. Still keeping rhythm with the music, she would edge up to one, grasp her by the hair and

drag her with great force to the priest. Soon all the women except one, were going through the contortions, and after a time the devils were declared driven out. The exception, the seventh woman, sat with her hands clasped before her, the hair loosened and thrown over the shoulders, looking up with an ecstatic expression, giving no suggestion of any emotion. I had to leave, but was told by one of our Christian workers that all the afternoon and night, yes, even into the following day, the priests labored with her before she could be brought under the right influences and the devil driven out. At times the priest will beat the woman over the bare back severely with a rattan to hasten the coming of the spell.

Oh, that music! It was continuous day and night. We occasionally hear it here and when I do a sharp pang of pain goes through my heart in behalf of those poor ignorant women going through those contortions because they know no better, because they know not the Savior of Mankind.

I must describe the last day. Before going to the temple it is necessary for everyone to have his or her bath, the water being taken from the tank or pond about a quarter of a mile from the temple. It is poured over the prospective worshiper from globe-shaped water-jars.

After this ablution the women must dry their cloths. This is done publically and forms a very picturesque sight. Hundreds of women, when going through this drying



THE DRYING PROCESS



THE GODDESS' CAR

process have one half of the cloth wrapped around the body while a friend stands at a distance holding out the other half until it is dried; then it is reversed and the remainder is allowed to wave in the sunshine. The two men who appear in the

picture that shows this drying process were listening to the preaching of the missionaries.

After all preparations are made, the various groups assemble, partake of food, decorate those who are to present themselves to the goddess with their offerings and move on up the bank toward the temple.

A large number of goats and chickens are sacrificed in front of the temple so that one has difficulty in finding a suitable footing. Only the blood is donated to the temple, the remainder being carried away and prepared for a feast before the people start on their homeward journey.

The day closes with the car procession, in which the goddess has been placed with great pomp and display of flowers.

The car is dragged around the main streets of the town, drawn by hundreds of people, while those who are still possessed with devils, proceed dancing with a great deal of energy and shouting. The noise and music are deafening. It is almost impossible to breathe because of the dust, red pepper having been sprinkled about beforehand so as to make the people cough.

Turning away with a sad heart, I longed for the day when these horrible conditions would disappear, and when the peace and love of the Savior would fill all the hearts of the women of India.



DEVOTEES CARRYING WATER FROM THE POOL TO THE TEMPLE